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The Pain of Others in Antonio Altarriba's *El cielo en la cabeza*

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Abstract: This article analyzes the graphic novel *El cielo en la cabeza* by Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García Sánchez, and Lola Moral, examining how it portrays a racialized character and transforms his struggles into a matter of concern for a predominantly White readership in Spain. Using Susan Sontag's critique of visual representation in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the study explores how the graphic novel's visual and narrative techniques draw readers into the harrowing experience of Nivek, a young Congolese migrant, compelling them to confront the brutal, racially motivated realities he faces. The article argues that by bringing the atrocities closer to home and revealing Spain's participation in the migrant crisis, the work avoids portraying its protagonist as a victim and prevents readers from being mere voyeurs. While recognizing the antiracist intention of *El cielo en la cabeza*, the study suggests that such work could be further developed by including the voices of Black people, an endeavor which would require collaboration from the publishing industry. This analysis contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of visual storytelling in addressing social justice issues and the responsibilities of White creators in antiracist work.

Keywords: antiracism/antirracismo, Antonio Altarriba, *El cielo en la cabeza*, graphic novels/novela gráfica, migration/migración, Spain/España, visual representation/representación visual

How do you interpret the look on the face of a young adolescent male when he stares unflinchingly at you from the page after having just committed an atrocious act? Do you read defiance in his eyes, causing you to feel fear or anger? Or, do you see the blank stare of a dissociated gaze provoked by trauma, causing you to feel compassion and empathy? What would you need to feel compelled to learn about and understand this twelve-year-old? Does it matter to you that he is from sub-Saharan Africa? What would it take for you to consider that this adolescent himself is the victim of an even greater atrocity that is entrenched within an insidious system? What would it take for you to recognize your own role in this system? The graphic novel *El cielo en la cabeza* (translated literally as *The Sky in the Head*), written by Antonio Altarriba, illustrated by Sergio García Sánchez and colored by Lola Moral, obliges the reader to reflect upon these questions.¹ In fact, by the time the young protagonist, Nivek, kills his family and stares at the reader, the reader has already learned enough about Nivek to realize that his survival hinges on a grim choice: kill or be killed. Through the mode of graphic storytelling, *El cielo en la cabeza* appeals to the readers' empathy and invites them to reflect on their own complicity in contemporary tragedies by questioning Europe's role in creating systems of power that strip immigrants of their agency and their dignity.

Introduction

El cielo en la cabeza was published in the fall of 2023 and has garnered high praise in both Spanish and French press, earning nine awards across both countries at the time of this

manuscript's completion.² The protagonist is Nivek, a twelve-year-old enslaved in the coltan mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). There he demonstrates his bravery and is rounded up by the mine bosses to work as a *kadogo*, or child soldier, for the Raïa Mutomboki militia. As part of his initiation, he must murder his family—the first of many murders and horrors in which the reader will witness Nivek engage.³ Nivek shortly thereafter flees the militia and crosses a string of hostile environments including the jungle, the savannah, and the desert. Reaching Libya, Nivek is sold as a slave and sent to fight to the death in gladiator-style spectacles. He brutally kills opponents he does not know, but when he is scheduled to fight a new friend, together they devise a plan to steal the money from ticket sales and escape. This cash allows him to buy a passage to cross the Mediterranean on a raft, where he will witness more death. Nivek finally makes it to Spain, where his only means of survival is illegally selling merchandise on city streets.

The story is a series of unfathomable tragedies interspersed with moments of love and beauty. One critic described it as a combination of “cruelty and fraternal love, financial profit and dehumanizing exploitation, nihilism and the beauty of Africa, torture and love, ashes and orchards” (Boix). Altarriba asserts that the reality in the DRC is actually more horrific than the graphic novel's portrayals (“El cielo en la cabeza” 12:50–15:45). Author, illustrator and colorist all leveraged their crafts to filter the violence to make the story more believable (9:45–12:45).

The tragic narrative seems at odds with the graphic novel's visual style, which is more cartoonish than realistic. For example, sometimes eyes are just dots or lines, heads are just circles, body shapes are elongated or drawn disproportionately. Comics scholar Scott McCloud points out that the abstraction of cartoons invites the reader to see themselves, while realist drawings invite the reader to see “the face of another” (36). Given the extremely violent nature and the geographic location of Nivek's travails, the mainstream reader in Spain is not likely to directly identify with the specifics of Nivek's story, but the cartoonish style will contribute to a reduced likelihood of “otherizing” Nivek and a greater likelihood to identify with a shared humanity. Similarly, drawings with cartoon elements shift the focus from the messenger to the concept (37). In other words, the reader will focus less on Nivek as an individual, and more on what is happening to him. In this way, Nivek, although an individual with a name, also comes to stand in as the representative of a collective of people.

While *El cielo en la cabeza* follows Nivek's story chronologically through his teenage years, it powerfully inverts the reader's typical encounter with immigrant street vendors in Madrid. For many Spaniards and tourists, these vendors' stories begin and end with brief glimpses of them selling goods or being chased by police on city streets. The graphic novel concludes with precisely such a scene. But by this point, readers have already traveled through Nivek's youth and witnessed the complex journey that brought him to the streets of Madrid. What might otherwise be just another fleeting urban encounter becomes the culmination of a deeply personal story, compelling readers to see beyond these momentary interactions to understand the full human life behind them. The reasons that migrants are willing to risk their lives to get to Europe are rendered with visceral detail. Using Susan Sontag's critique of visual representation in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, this study will analyze the ways in which *El cielo en la cabeza* portrays a racialized character and how it transforms his problem into a matter of concern for a predominantly White readership. In her book-length essay, Sontag examines the effect on the public of war photography in the media. Sontag argues that the visuals play an important role in what the public pays attention to and, ultimately, convey to the viewers the understanding that they cannot possibly grasp the extent of the horror experienced by those whose pain they see (125–26). While *El cielo en la cabeza* uses illustrations, and not photographs, I argue that the same principle holds: the visuals heighten the element of *pathos* in the tragedy. In other words, the readers become emotionally aware of their own dis/engagement with the tragedies of African migrants. I suggest that this visual creation of *pathos* in combination with the

narrative form of the graphic novel brings the readers into the story in such a way that it makes them complicit with the tragedy. Sontag maintains that *every* image “is an invitation to look” (45). Altarriba, García, and Moral might add, every image is an invitation to understand.

Global Refugee Crisis

Like much of Europe, Spain is prone to powerful anti-immigration sentiments. Many fear immigrants are a threat, particularly to the economy. The perception is that they steal jobs and use resources funded by taxpayers. In reality, a study in Spain shows that the actual numbers of jobs occupied by immigrants and the resources spent on immigrants are much lower than what Spaniards perceive them to be (Lancho). Fake news abounds with claims that immigrants arrive illegally with their pockets full of money, the latest iPhones, and disrespectful attitudes (Sobrinho Cabo). In contrast, cultural productions reveal different realities of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa including the fictional television series *Mar de plástico/Plastic Sea* (dir. Norberto López Amado, Alejandro Bazzano, Javier Quintas, previously on *Netflix*); the novelized biography, *Miñán: Hermanito/Little Brother: A Refugee's Odyssey* (authors Ibrahima Balde, Amets Arzallus Antia and translator Timberlake Wertenbake); and, films such as *Adú* (dir. Salvador Calvo, *Netflix*) and *El salto/Jumping the Fence* (dir. Benito Zambrano). Zambrano believes in the power of art to effect change and suggests that “desde la emoción, desde el estómago, quizá podamos cambiar las cosas” (“Benito Zambrano”). Similarly, graphic novels in Spain have a history of addressing issues of immigration and refugees, particularly focusing on immigration from Africa to Spain. Several notable works explore this theme with depth and humanity. *Olimpita* by Hernán Migoya and Joan Marín depicts the tragic tale of a Senegalese immigrant in Barcelona. In *Sansamba*, Isabel Franc and Susanna Martín reveal an unlikely yet touching friendship between a Senegalese immigrant and a woman in Barcelona. Javier Gallego and Juan Gallego's *Como si nunca hubieran sido* brings attention to the often-overlooked stories of those who die while crossing the Mediterranean. More recently, Javier de Isusi's *Asylum* draws compelling parallels between contemporary themes of immigration to Spain's history of exile during the Spanish Civil War.⁴

Antonio Altarriba, both a graphic novel author and a scholar, participates in this tradition of using graphic novels for social commentary. His commitment to social justice is evident in both his creative works and his scholarship.⁵ Altarriba's diptychs of his parents' biographies, *El arte de volar/The Art of Flying* and *El ala rota*, demonstrate his engagement with the recovery of historical memory in Spain.⁶ His *noir* trilogy (*Yo, asesino; Yo, loco; Yo, mentiroso*) offers a critique of class struggles, social conflict and inequality as experienced in the city (Bracco and Faye 107). In interviews about the creation of *El cielo en la cabeza*, Altarriba reveals his commitment to the injustices faced by African migrants to Europe both in their countries of origin and in their countries of destination. He relates that, after learning about the situation in the DRC in a fortuitous meeting with Idoia Moreno, president and cofounder of the NGO Jambo Congo, he felt compelled to tell the story of the Congolese to others (Jiménez). Moreno, a nurse from Vitoria-Gasteiz in the Basque region where Altarriba lives, started the Jambo Congo project independently, and it became an official NGO in 2016. Since then, it has built schools in the DRC including a preschool, primary school, secondary school and a vocational school. It also provides rehabilitation services to children who were soldiers. Other projects include the construction of a small hospital and wells for clean drinking water (Jambo Congo). At the end of the graphic novel, Altarriba thanks Moreno for her role as a documentarian and a consultant. He also dedicates *El cielo en la cabeza* to Dr. Denis Mukwege, 2018 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, for his work with victims of sexual violence in the DRC. Both of these real people appear in the graphic novel as health care workers in the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, DRC where Mukwege still practices medicine and offers social services to victims of sexual violence (Tanis).

Raising awareness of this work and humanizing the Congolese offers a counter narrative to that of the politicians in Spain who associate immigrants with terrorists (Teso).⁷

Furthermore, we should note, as does N. Michelle Murray in the introduction of her study *Home Away from Home: Immigrant Narratives, Domesticity, and Coloniality in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, that Spain was a country that dealt with *emigration* for most of the twentieth century (13). It was not until 1986 when Spain joined the European Economic Community that Spain began to receive immigrants (*ibid.*). Murray focuses her study on “difference—the difference once problematically ascribed to Spain by other nations” in order to “construct a narrative of democratic Spain that focuses on those who are marginalized” (16). Although Murray specifically examines domestic labor performed by immigrant women and the legislation around their work, her observations about racism, marginalization, and the colonial mindset are applicable to this study, as is her claim that “aesthetic, fictional works present economies of affect that show how inequality takes shape . . . through emotional positionalities entrenched in discourses of power” (17). The relationship between aesthetics, affect, and power will form the basis for this current study.

From Chaos to Commitment in *El Cielo en la cabeza*

The artwork in *El cielo en la cabeza* creates a sense of chaos and destabilization through four means: (1) the layout of the panels and the page, (2) the visual content, (3) the visual rhythm, and (4) the color palette. The most salient visual feature of the work is that the images occupy every inch of the page to the physical limits of the top, bottom and side edges—every drawing extends to the end of the page, nothing is contained. Everything blends, everything bleeds. With no blank space on the page to offer a visual respite or separate the text from the reader, the reading experience is intensified. It is also decelerated. Comics scholar Hillary Chute notes that the combination of word and image in comics requires readers to slow down and “grapple with producing meaning” (37). This need to produce meaning, or understanding, is particularly significant on the page in which Nivek shoots his family (see Figure 1).

The top half is composed of square panels divided by gutters which convey the sense that the reader is looking into the house through the grilles of a window. Nivek's head is in one panel, his torso is in the one below and his arm is in the one next to that. The warlord's disembodied arm is holding the machine gun by its foregrip in one panel; in the adjacent panel, the barrel of the gun is being placed in his hand (Altarriba). The gutters visually separate Nivek's head (reason) from his heart (emotion) and from his hand (agency), symbolizing the fragmentation of his being. The reader is outside the scene and witness to the family's fear and the moment in which the militia breaks Nivek. This fragmentation helps explain to the reader just how Nivek could commit such a heinous act. The entire bottom half of the page is a single, large panel in which Nivek shoots the huddled mass of his brother, sister, mother, and grandfather. In contrast to the top half of the page with gutters, the lack of gutters in the moment of the atrocity is notable. McCloud proposes that gutters serve as spaces in which the readers imagine that which is not shown explicitly but which implicitly happens between the panels, making the reader the very author of whatever happens (68). Conversely, the scene in which Nivek shoots his family leaves nothing to the reader's imagination. Everything is drawn: Nivek pulling the trigger, the bullets flying through the air and the family recoiling with blood spurting from their twisted bodies (Altarriba). The reader is not the “author” here, but rather the witness to a scene that transpires in what feels like slow motion. Like in the war photographs studied by Sontag, the image presents documentation of what happened. However, unlike the war photographs, this tragedy does not happen far away, rather right before the reader's eyes. If, on one hand, this violence is located in faraway Africa, it is brought closer to home through the graphic novel. Moreover, the absence of margins and boundaries blurs the line between the act of reading and the act of experiencing,



Figure 1. *El cielo en la cabeza* © Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García, and Lola Moral. Norma Editorial 2023.

bringing the reader into the story as more than a witness: the blood from the casualties splatters in the precise place where the reader holds the book. As their hands physically enter the space of the turbulent story, they become less of a voyeur and closer to the story itself. Proximity to an issue is the starting point for challenging injustice (Stevenson 17–18).

Sontag points out that sometimes viewers want to look at violent images without flinching, and other times there is pleasure in flinching (41–42). The reader of *El cielo en la cabeza* is caught between the tension of looking and not looking. While the violent content might want to make them turn away, the visual overload itself compels them to keep their gaze on the page to create meaning. Sontag further notes that viewers of violent images may feel both shame and shock when confronting such images (42). Building on these ideas, Judith Butler, in her discussion of photographs of torture, argues that wider circulation of violent images forces a public reckoning, leading to emotional responses that can result in action (100). We can aptly apply this scholarship on photography to graphic novels recognizing similar effects on the reader. The power of *El cielo en la cabeza* lies in its ability to create awareness and prompt very real human, mixed emotions in readers around wanting/not wanting to see and wanting/not wanting to know about the genuine violence portrayed in this fictional story.

Let's consider the visual rhythm of the narrative. The novel provides graphic evidence to support the verbal narrative that crossing borders involves violence, violation of norms, and arbitrariness. The changing size, shape, and inconsistent existence of panels, create a rhythm that is anything but regular. This irregularity is another factor in the sense of chaos both within

the story itself and in the reader's experience of it. What appears to be a gutter at the edge of the page turns into a tree trunk, or a wavy line gutter in the middle of the page doubles as the ocean, thus destabilizing the very definition of the form of the gutter (Altarriba). Sometimes the sky or the ground or the jungle trails off to the edge, other times the edge of the page truncates the image—whether it be an animate, inanimate object or a person—thus violating the rules of cohesion within the frame. Every image is unruly, symbolizing the chaotic and arbitrary nature of the scenario and verbal narrative. Sometimes characters are superimposed across a series of panels, other times their bodies are divided by gutters thick or thin, yet other times the images are fragmented and dispersed in a Cubist style that evokes Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)—Spain's quintessential visual representation of human inflicted tragedy. The irregularity, dynamism, and evocation provided by the visual narrative support the verbal narrative to depict a world governed by lawlessness, unrest, and violence. Finally, the lack of page numbers contributes to the chaotic reading experience by heightening the reader's sense of disorientation. In these ways, the work lends itself first to an emotional response and then to an analytical one.

The color choices in *El cielo en la cabeza* similarly create a sense of emotional dissonance. The dominant color is pure black, or the absence of color, thus creating a sense of omnipresent void. The overall palette features muted tones of earthy greens and browns, subtle blues, and intermittent subdued shades of rust and rose. Overall, the colors project a calming and grounding sense that works against the extreme violence of the narrative. By displaying colors that do not shout at the reader, the reader is brought into the story. The colorist, Lola Moral, explains that she chose to moderate the violence of the drawings by avoiding dramatic colors ("El cielo en la cabeza" 11:25–53). She also explains that she chose to depict the blood as black rather than red because, with blood everywhere, she thought so much red would stand out too much (23:36). Ultimately, the absence of an overwhelming amount of red does create a "less bloody" effect. However, depicting blood flowing from black characters as black blood raises questions about how White Europeans consider race. From medieval times to the present, "blood" has been a synonym for "race" and an excuse for exclusion of racialized people from the social, political, and economic systems of hegemonic power. Does depicting the blood emanating from Black people as black subliminally send the message that the blood of Black people is different from the blood of other people thereby dehumanizing them? Does the toned-down depiction of extreme violence protect the sensibilities of the predominantly White readership in Spain? Or, does it signal that sensitizing White people to racialized people's problems needs to happen in a somewhat measured way? Finally, what does it mean that, in a single small panel there is a White Spanish police officer who also bleeds black blood? Does this, in some way, create a common bond between the two adversaries? The graphic novel does not provide clear answers to these questions but the fact that it raises them contributes to the value of the work.

The Beginning and the End: Responsibility

In her analysis of war reporting, Sontag suggests that "The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying" (70–71). In other words, it is easier to view the suffering of others than one's own. In *El cielo en la cabeza*, the extremely graphic violence parallels the "frontal views" Sontag mentions. Furthermore, she specifically acknowledges postcolonial Africa as "exist[ing] in the consciousness of the general public in the rich world" as a place experiencing "a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired" (71). The extremely violent images, then, become a way to criticize from a distance the "other," the destitute neighbor, the "not us." In this way, it could appear that the reader is distanced from the horrors Nivek experiences. However, *El cielo en la cabeza* resists this colonialist mindset by reducing the distance between the reader and the



Figure 2. *El cielo en la cabeza* © Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García, and Lola Moral. Norma Editorial 2023.

protagonist by directly involving the reader in Nivek's "birth" and, ultimately, his "death," which I analyze in the section below.

Sontag observes that exhibiting images of "cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries" without recognizing how one's own society also produces its own victims promotes the colonialist mindset of otherizing (72). The other is "regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (ibid.). The analytical reader might ask whether *El cielo en la cabeza* is presenting Nivek as a victim to be gawked at and pitied. However, it is precisely through the act of seeing that the reader connects with Nivek from the very first page of the story. The reader sees the first two images *with* the protagonist from his perspective (see Figure 2).

The graphic novel opens through Nivek's eyes when he is buried in the collapse of a mineshaft. Surrounded by blackness, we see nothing other than the transcription of the onomatopoeic sound of "crock crock crock crock crock" as Nivek's friends use a pickaxe to create an opening through which he can break out. Nivek and the reader both look up at the sky through an irregularly shaped slit-like opening, reminiscent of a mother's birth canal through which a new life is about to pass. On the following page, the first image is of Nivek curled up in the fetal position, further underscoring the image of an infant and new life (see Figure 3). The reader is now separated from Nivek, looking *at* him. From this moment to the end of the graphic novel, Nivek will become the object of the reader's gaze, thus raising questions of the "other" mentioned above.



Figure 3. *El cielo en la cabeza* © Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García, and Lola Moral. Norma Editorial 2023.

At this moment of Nivek's "birth," the verbal text works in conjunction with the images to underscore his vulnerability. Following the onomatopoeia, the first words of the graphic novel are two questions: "Nivek, ¿me oyes?" and "Nivek, ¿estás vivo?" By opening Nivek's story with questions, the graphic novel suggests that a world of possibilities exists while simultaneously signaling the precariousness of life through the precise questions that are asked. The reader cannot assume that Nivek is connected to his world, or even that he is alive. The reader sees Nivek in profile, his head cradled in the crux of his right arm and his left hand over his heart. At his moment of metaphorical birth, he is protecting both his reason and his emotion, both of which he will need to draw upon to survive in the world into which he is about to be propelled. By portraying Nivek in a vulnerable, self-protective posture, the verbal and visual elements of the graphic novel work together to amplify the story's impact. Nivek's first words are, "Estoy vivo, Joseph. Ayúdame a salir." The reader sees Nivek as a survivor and a fighter who demonstrates his will to survive; he is depicted as a victim without reinforcing a victimized identity. We might ask, as does Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe, in his discussion of the ideas of the French Afro-Caribbean political philosopher Frantz Fanon, "in a context where everything is likely to come in contact with violence and death, . . . what does it mean to say . . . 'I am alive'?" (154). The reader will see that, for Nivek, being alive means fighting relentlessly to pursue his dream of leaving the DRC. When his agency is ultimately taken away, his life will cease to have meaning despite having fulfilled his dream.

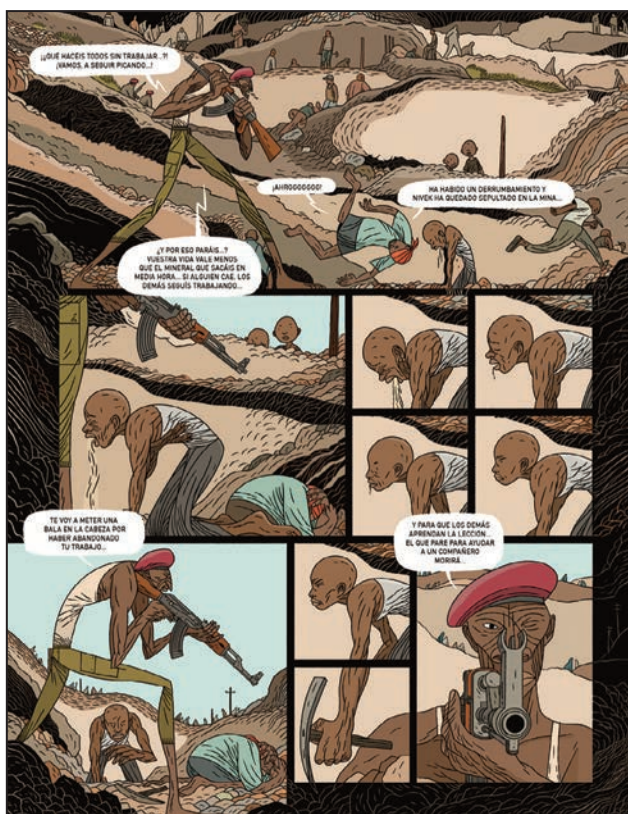


Figure 4. *El cielo en la cabeza* © Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García, and Lola Moral. Norma Editorial 2023.

After identifying with Nivek's point of view on the first page, then observing him from a third-person perspective on the second page, the readers quickly meet Nivek's direct gaze on the third page (see Figure 4, bottom left panel).

The warlord/mine boss/militia leader is on the verge of killing Nivek's friend Joseph because he stopped working in order to save Nivek from the collapsed mine. Within the narrative, Nivek is looking directly at the mine boss, but the illustration fixes Nivek's gaze on the readers. The young boy is filled with rage and on his hands and knees—his left hand raised off the ground and ready to pounce and kill the warlord/readers. Similarly, the warlord is also looking directly at the readers through the sights of his assault weapon. Both characters are prepared to kill. Nivek will strike first, killing the oppressor to save Joseph. These dual perspectives—where characters break the fourth wall to confront the reader while diegetically looking at another character—powerfully merge the narrative and real-world experiences, making readers feel directly implicated in the scene's violence. The reader understands that the only way for one to survive in this environment is to kill or be killed. Nivek learns this harsh lesson at the age of twelve exemplifying Mbembe's claim that violence is "brought into the *mind* of the colonized" (154; emphasis added). Through Nivek's direct gaze at the reader, the reader becomes the abuser. Throughout the novel, Nivek will look directly at the reader both when he commits atrocities out of self-defense or voluntarily, as well as when he is the victim of atrocities. In this way, the reader assumes the roles of perpetrator, bystander, and potential savior. Nivek will look squarely at the reader more than twenty times in the 144-

page graphic novel, thus creating a sustained relationship of implication between himself and the reader.

After Nivek flees the mines and the militia, his harrowing journey across Africa and the Mediterranean takes him to Spain. The graphic novel closes with a four-page sequence of Nivek in Madrid, where he sells illicit imitation designer handbags on the street of Gran Vía.⁸ He works with another man who is presumably from Northern Africa as signaled by the fez he wears (Altarriba). In this way, the graphic novel shows that, once in Spain, immigrants/migrants from Northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa lose their individuality, becoming merely stereotypes of their regions. They are reduced to a collective of illegal peddlers who serve the whims of consumers who exploit them by offering to pay abusively low prices. Locating the end of Nivek's story on one of Spain's most iconic streets in the city that is considered the cultural and political heart of the country symbolizes the common nature of the scene. When Nivek sells a bag for too little, the other seller warns him that he will either be fired or beaten by their boss. Nivek replies, "No me imaginaba que Europa fuera así." In associating Spain with Europe, the novel accomplishes two seemingly contradictory things. Firstly, it distances Spain from Africa, asserting that "here" (Spain/Europe) is distinct from "there" (Africa). This distinction challenges the historical nineteenth-century notion that "Africa begins at the Pyrenees," which positioned Spain as more African than European.⁹ While this European association separates Spain from Africa geographically and culturally, by reinforcing Spain's role as a European nation, it holds Spain accountable for its participation in and response to the migrant crisis, a predominantly European concern. The European Union, as a partnership between twenty-seven countries, has been called upon to work together in addressing the issues behind why people like Nivek flee their countries. The reader has learned that Nivek is not a powerless victim, nor someone who arrives with his pockets lined with cash. Rather, he is a victim of society who enacts his agency and is continually failed by systems of power with which the reader is complicit. To use Sontag's language, his "condition of being powerless does not reduce him to powerlessness" (78). Until he arrives in Spain, that is.

When the police arrive on Gran Vía, Nivek and his partner scoop up the merchandise and run. The policeman who chases Nivek threatens, insults, and racializes him. He shouts, "¿Dónde estás. Negro de mierda . . . ? Te meteré en un puro que no olvidarás en la vida" thus provoking a physical altercation between the two that ends in Nivek being wounded by the officer's gunshot and the officer being paralyzed by Nivek's kick to his head and neck (see Figure 5).

This one-page sequence of twenty-four equally sized panels presents a regularity seen for the first time in the graphic novel signaling that this type of confrontation is a regular occurrence. The lack of aesthetically intriguing drawings connotes something ordinary. For a person living in Madrid (and, by extension, the Spanish reader), there is nothing noteworthy here, it is simply a routine chase between a White cop and an African delinquent, accentuated by close-ups of running feet and hands on guns and necks. The sounds, "crack," "agh," and "bang" are reminiscent of a classic good guy/bad guy comic strip. Caught between fiction and brutal reality, the reader views the page as if it were a series of tiny images on a fiche of microfilm—a news story reduced and to be filed away, all but forgotten.

The graphic novel closes with Nivek's incarceration (see Figure 6). On the final page, we see him the way we saw him for the first time: curled in a fetal position with his head cradled in the crux of his right arm and his left hand holding his heart.

He is visibly older, no longer the twelve-year-old boy we saw lying at the bottom of the mineshaft. This time he is not affirming that he is alive, rather, with his eyes closed he is calling out to the mother he killed, as he did at various points throughout the novel. He calls "mamá" fifteen times on the last page and says nothing else. His clothing, bedding, and skin are all depicted in muted shades of brown and tan. The wrinkles in the bed look strikingly like the grain of tree bark, and his body looks like the knot on the felled timber. He embodies the wound



Figure 5. *El cielo en la cabeza* © Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García, and Lola Moral. Norma Editorial 2023.

and mark of human destruction. On this page, the verbal and the visual once again work together to depict the psychological damage and the longing for safety experienced by this migrant from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Can we claim that Nivek survived the horrors of his situation? Mbembe's assertion that black survival is over-determined by race (152) prompts the question: did Nivek truly survive, or did Spain negate his agency to the point of removing his personhood? The emotions evoked in this final page are those of loneliness, despair, and shameful disgust.

Another character appears on this page: the White male guard who hears Nivek's cries and silently peeks through the peephole inspection window. Is this an act of compassion? The difference in their sizes invites the reader to empathize with Nivek, the "criminal," who is larger, more complex, and who the reader knows better. In the bottom one-sixth of the page, the reader sees a sequence of five panels of the peephole from the perspective of the inside of the cell, assuming for the second and final time, Nivek's perspective. Again, Nivek is alone and sees nothing but blackness, reminding the reader of his experience at the bottom of the mineshaft. The second panel is a close-up of the guard's wide-open eye, which is brown like the coloring of Nivek's bed. They share something in common, despite the different colors of their skin. In the third panel, the guard's eye is closed. He refuses to look at what he sees. Similarly, right above this center of the five panels, the sheet from Nivek's bed drapes down mimicking a wrinkled closed eyelid. Is this an omen that the guard's eye will remain shut into his old age? If the guard stands in as a symbol for the system, does it mean that, although time will pass, things will not



Figure 6. *El cielo en la cabeza* © Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García, and Lola Moral. Norma Editorial 2023.

change for Nivek or others like him? The fourth panel shows an onomatopoeic screeching sound when the guard re-closes the peephole door. Even though Nivek's eyes are also closed, the screeching noise reveals the guard's presence to him. We finally have here the answer to the opening question of the graphic novel, "¿Me oyes?" Yes, Nivek can hear. The guard's eye is still closed as he closes the peephole door—even as he checks on Nivek, he refuses to look and does nothing to help him. Finally, the last panel of the page and the graphic novel is a small, pure black panel with the sound of "crock" indicating a dull, thud sound. In a graphic novel where onomatopoeia abound, it is noteworthy that "crock" appears only at the beginning and the end. The repetition five times at the beginning of the story signals insistence and verve as Nivek hammers at the caved-in earth to free him from the collapsed mineshaft. In contrast, the single instance at the end of the story signals finality. Nivek's life comes to an end the way he began—in darkness and joining perspective with the reader. Along the journey, the reader has been invited to see the world through Nivek's eyes.

This final blow for Nivek takes place on "our" soil—that is, the soil of the authors. As Sontag explains, the use of images of atrocities serves to make other people's problems feel less remote and, I would add, more relevant to the viewer (84). To use her words, "evil [is] *here*" (88; original emphasis). *El cielo en la cabeza*, as a graphic novel, brings the atrocities closer to "home," and reveals how Spain, too, participates in this particular "war." This recognition/admission of participation in the tragedy is one of the qualities that keeps the *El cielo en la cabeza* from victimizing Nivek and prevents the reader from being simply a voyeur in the face of the pain of others.

The most obvious problems conveyed in *El cielo en la cabeza* are the multiple human rights violations Nivek experiences before arriving in Spain. In interviews about *El cielo en la cabeza*, Altarriba connects the experience of the Congolese to Spaniards by maintaining that the wars and human rights violations in the DRC matter (to the Spaniards) because of the immigration implications. He also suggests the issues matter (to the world) because of how people benefit from cell phones that use the coltan mined in the DRC (Jiménez). Within the space of the graphic novel itself, it is Nivek's very arrival in Spain that prevents the work from depicting Europe as the all-knowing, superior *self*, but rather as part of the problem in the way it dis/engages with the *other*.

Conclusion

Graphic novel critics in Spain, such as Teso and Boix, deem *El cielo en la cabeza* a necessary work. It is essential to humanize the immigrants featured in the news, which often limits coverage to stereotypical highlights of capsized dinghies, the walls in Ceuta and Melilla, or street sellers in the cities. The multitude of Black lives are reduced to Black bodies in the media and thus distanced and dehumanized in the viewer's mind—they are not people, but rather problems or victims, at best. However, in Sontag's words, images of extreme violence "are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore" (7). Like the war photographs that Sontag discusses, the illustrations in *El cielo en la cabeza* show us "what human beings are capable of doing" (115). It may be normal to want to turn away but, to use Sontag's words, we have been invited "to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?" (117). Joining forces with NGOs, works of art like *El cielo en la cabeza*, which is produced by people in positions of power, can help become part of the solution. The graphic novel's visual techniques draw the readers into Nivek's harrowing experience, compelling them, too, to confront the brutal, racially motivated realities he faces. Anti-racist activist and author Desirée Bela-Lobedde affirms that "las personas blancas pueden ser el puente a otras personas para seguir combatiendo el racismo entre todos" ("Taller"). Educating oneself and each other is an important step in using one's power to support someone who does not have the same privilege of power.¹⁰ Yet, speaking *for* people is not enough. As a White reader of a text by White authors about a Black character, I am left wondering how this story might be received by Black readers of different nationalities, immigration statuses, or generations. I also wonder how it might have been told had the authors been Black. And, lastly, I wonder what role the publishing industry plays in the dynamics of who tells whose stories. It seems that one responsible next step in antiracist work would be to empower people of color, including immigrants, to speak for themselves by helping create platforms for them to do so.

NOTES

¹ As of June 2024, *El cielo en la cabeza* has been translated to French, Catalan, and Polish, but not English. An English translation poses the problem of choosing between certain words that condition the reader's engagement with the graphic novel while the original Spanish title leaves more open and vague. For example, *cielo* can be translated as "sky," "Heaven," "Heavens," or even "dreams" in so much as the sky represents the protagonist's aspirations. The definite pronoun *la* (the) before *cabeza* (head) also necessitates an interpretive choice on the part of the translator, as it standard to use possessive pronouns, rather than definite pronouns, with body parts in English. So, the question arises of *whose* head we are talking about. The cover art clearly indicates that it is the protagonist's head and thus, "his" head would be the appropriate translation. However, if Nivek serves as a synecdoche for others like him, as the graphic novel implies, we might consider a more appropriate translation to be "their" head. Alas, the use of a third-person pronoun, whether singular or plural,

suggests a distance between the reader and the “other,” in this way working against the sense of solidarity between reader and character the work aims to create. Ultimately, I wonder if something like “A Head Full of Hope” might bring the reader closer to the empathetic perspective that the graphic novel seeks to inspire.

² These prizes include the award for Best Script at the 13th Zaragoza Salón de Comic Awards 2023; the Grand Prize at the 9th Granada Noir 2023; the Jury and Columnists’ 1st Prize at BD Gest’Arts 2023; the Book Prize of the 12th District of Paris 2024; the Critics’ Awards for Best National Scriptwriter and Best National Work at the 23rd Avilés Comic Convention 2024; the 2024 Grand Prize from the ACBD (l’Association des critiques et journalistes de Bande Dessinée); and “Understanding the Present” Splash Comic Festival Sagunto 2024 (Altarriba, “Premios”).

³ Altarriba affirms that child soldiers are commonly required to kill their families, so they have no home to return to and so that the older soldiers stand in as paternal figures (Jiménez).

⁴ For academic studies on these graphic novels, see the article by Jeffrey K. Coleman on *Olimpita*, by Judite Rodrigues on *Como si nunca hubieran sido*, and by Nagore Sedano on *Asylum*. For a study on graphic novels printed in Spain that deal with immigration to Europe, see the article by Raúl Álvarez Gómez. For other genres of literary works on African immigration, see the edited collection by Debra Faszter-McMahon, Victoria Ketz, and Anne Cruz.

⁵ See Altarriba’s *Los intelectuales y la dictadura franquista: Cultura y poder en España de 1939 a 1975* (Editorial Pablo Iglesias).

⁶ *El arte de volar* has been translated into Brazilian Portuguese, Catalan, Czech, English, French, German, Italian, Korean, Macedonian, Portuguese, and Turkish. The English version, *The Art of Flying*, was translated by Adrian West and published in London in 2015. *El ala rota* is currently being translated to English and has already been translated to Czech, French, German, Italian, Korean, Portuguese (published in Brazil and Portugal), and Turkish. In English, the title would be *The Broken Wing*.

Among the numerous publications examining *El arte de volar* or *El ala rota* are those by Carmela Artime et al., Lieve Behiels, Marina Bettaglio, Francesca Crippa, Xavier Dapena, Diego Espiña Barros, David Fernández de Arriba, Elena Galán Fajardo and José Carlos Rueda Laffond, Carmen García Navarro, David García-Reyes, Kyra A. Kietrys, Elena Masarah Revuelta, José Antonio Mérida Donoso et al., Juan Carlos Pérez García, Ivan Pintor Iranzo, Javier Sánchez Zapatero, Carla Suárez Vega, Jordan Tronsgard, and Lydia Vázquez and Juan Manuel Ibeas-Altamira.

⁷ In Spanish politics, this rhetoric comes from the far-right Vox party. See “Vox equipara la inmigración ilegal al ‘terrorismo’ y pide ‘garantizar las fronteras’” (RTVE.es), www.rtve.es/noticias/20231027/vox-equipara-inmigracion-ilegal-terrorismo-pide-proteger-fronteras/2459423.shtml.

⁸ There is a common expression the Madrilenians use to show the pride they feel for their city: “*De Madrid al cielo*,” which literally means “from Madrid to the sky/Heaven.” In other words, Madrid is the best place on earth and the ultimate destination; the only better place to be is Heaven. When Nivek has the *cielo* in his head, it is not difficult to make the association with Madrid. For Nivek, however, his ultimate destination becomes not only his metaphorical death, but also a hellish resting place.

⁹ The origin of this well-known expression is debated by historians, but it appears to date from the nineteenth century and serves to disassociate Spain from Europe and the progress being experienced in England, France, and Germany.

¹⁰ Important resources for education on racism in Spain include <https://sosracismo.eu/>, www.desireebela.com/ and <https://afrofeminas.com/>. I am grateful to my colleagues, Dr. Esther Alarcón Arana and Dr. Ibis Sierra Audivert, whose insightful conversations helped shape my thinking and who pointed me to valuable sources. Special thanks to my student Maya Mercier for her careful work on the bibliography.

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